



July 2013

BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

DOD Is Meeting Most
Targets for Colombia's
Regional Helicopter
Training Center but
Should Track
Graduates

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Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. national security is inextricably tied to the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to help foreign partners build their own security capacity. The United States has had a long-standing partnership with Colombia, a key part of which has been U.S. assistance to Colombia's aviation unit in counternarcotics efforts. RHTC is one of DOD's priority security cooperation programs. The Senate Committee on Armed Services has recognized that many security cooperation programs are key to U.S. military-to-military relations with foreign partners. Because of concerns regarding DOD's ability to assess the impact of these programs, the committee mandated GAO to assess their effectiveness, efficiency, and medium- and long-term results.

In this review, GAO assesses (1) U.S. government allocations, obligations, and disbursements for RHTC in fiscal year 2009 through May 2013; (2) the extent to which DOD has achieved its goal and targets for RHTC; and (3) DOD's progress, if any, in implementing its plans to nationalize RHTC (i.e., fully transfer the program's financial responsibility to Colombia). GAO interviewed DOD, State, and Colombian officials in Washington, D.C.; Alabama; Virginia; and Colombia. GAO also reviewed DOD documents and funding data.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOD work with the government of Colombia to take steps to obtain information on Colombian graduates' use of skills obtained at RHTC in subsequent military assignments for at least 2 years after graduation. DOD concurred.

View [GAO-13-674](#). For more information, contact Charles Michael Johnson, Jr. at (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov.

July 2013

BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

DOD Is Meeting Most Targets for Colombia's Regional Helicopter Training Center but Should Track Graduates

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2009 through May 2013, the Department of Defense (DOD) allocated approximately \$73.9 million from its Counternarcotics Central Transfer Account to the Regional Helicopter Training Center (RHTC) in Colombia. As of May 2013, about \$47.0 million of this funding had been disbursed. Most of this funding was allocated to RHTC helicopter maintenance, including approximately \$31.1 million (42 percent) to a maintenance contract and about \$12.0 million (16 percent) for parts and tools. As of June 2013, the Department of State (State) had also allocated approximately \$382,000 from its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account toward training of helicopter mechanics for RHTC.

DOD has largely achieved its goal and targets for RHTC but does not collect any information on RHTC's longer-term results that would allow DOD to evaluate the extent to which RHTC helps to meet Colombia's counternarcotics aviation needs. For example, DOD has, for the most part, met its goal of providing RHTC training in accordance with DOD standards by providing training similar to that provided by the U.S. Army. Furthermore, DOD has met one of its two targets related to the number of students enrolled at RHTC—it has met its target for the number of Mexican students enrolled each year but has not met its target for the number of Colombian students enrolled each year because of insufficient capacity to accommodate more students. Moreover, DOD has generally exceeded its target of an 85 percent graduation rate for students at RHTC. However, DOD does not track any information on whether RHTC pilot graduates use their skills obtained at RHTC in subsequent military assignments. Colombia committed to retain personnel in assignments related to their training for a minimum of 2 years after graduation and to provide data on these personnel to DOD. According to DOD officials, they have requested but not received these data for pilot graduates. DOD began to track the personnel assignments of mechanics trained at RHTC in January 2013 because DOD prioritized obtaining these data to ensure sufficient mechanics for future work at RHTC.

DOD has made some progress in its plans to nationalize RHTC, but it has also extended the timeline for nationalization and faces challenges in meeting the revised timeline. The United States and Colombia initially planned to fully nationalize Colombia's basic helicopter training school by July 2009. After they agreed in 2009 to expand the school into RHTC, DOD began to plan for a projected nationalization date of 2016. Subsequently, DOD extended it to 2018 because DOD recognized that Colombia would not be ready to take over financial responsibility for the facility as originally planned. DOD's current plans for full nationalization in 2018 include separate timelines for certain components, including (1) ground instruction and helicopter simulators; (2) helicopters, parts, and tools; and (3) helicopter maintenance and mechanics training. DOD is on target to first nationalize RHTC ground instruction at the end of fiscal year 2013, but nationalization of some other components, such as simulator maintenance and parts and tools, is now scheduled for later than DOD had planned. Under current plans, State will provide FMF funds to cover the costs of these delays. Some uncertainties may affect DOD's ability to adhere to the current nationalization timeline, including unclear commitment from Colombia to RHTC nationalization and uncertainty regarding future U.S. funding for the program.

Contents

Letter		1
	Results	3
	Conclusions	5
	Recommendation for Executive Action	5
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	6
Appendix I	Briefing for Congressional Committees	7
Appendix II	Priorities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict	35
Appendix III	Comments from the Department of Defense	37
Appendix IV	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	39

Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
IERW	Initial Entry Rotary Wing
RHTC	Regional Helicopter Training Center
SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict
State	Department of State

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July 24, 2013

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman
The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The United States' national security is inextricably tied to the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to help foreign partners and allies build their own security capacity, which is an important aspect of sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership.¹ The United States has had a long-standing partnership with Colombia aimed at reducing the flow of illegal drugs from that country. As part of its efforts to support Colombia's counternarcotics efforts, the United States has helped Colombia build an army aviation brigade to conduct counternarcotics operations, in part by funding a basic helicopter training facility in Melgar, Colombia.² In 2009, the Department of Defense (DOD) began to assist Colombia in transforming this facility into the Regional Helicopter Training Center (RHTC).³ DOD's goal for RHTC is to meet Colombia's needs for training helicopter pilots, while also training as many as 24 third-country student pilots annually, primarily from Mexico, in accordance with DOD

¹Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, D.C., January 2012).

²In this report, "basic helicopter training" refers to Initial Entry Rotary Wing (IERW) training, an introduction to helicopter flight training. In IERW, student pilots learn the basics of flight over several months: how to start the engine of the aircraft, take off, hover, and land safely. Student pilots also learn other basic skills, such as instrument flight and use of night-vision goggles. IERW training prepares student pilots for advanced courses in military aircraft.

³In Colombia, RHTC is known as the *Escuela de Helicópteros de la Fuerza Pública*.

standards.⁴ DOD has also set targets for RHTC, including annual targets for the number of Mexican and Colombian students enrolled and for graduation rates. DOD and Colombia are planning to nationalize RHTC (i.e., fully transfer the program's financial responsibility to Colombia) in 2018.

In a committee report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, the Senate Committee on Armed Services recognized that many security cooperation programs are key to our military-to-military relations with allies and partners around the world. Because of issues regarding DOD's ability to assess the impact of these programs, GAO was mandated to examine selected U.S. security cooperation programs' effectiveness, efficiency, and medium- and long-term results.⁵ For this review, we assessed (1) U.S. government allocations, obligations, and disbursements for RHTC in fiscal year 2009 through May 2013; (2) the extent to which DOD has achieved its goal and targets related to transforming the Colombian basic helicopter school into a regional facility capable of providing basic helicopter training for Colombia, Mexico, and other countries in accordance with DOD standards; and (3) DOD's progress, if any, in implementing its plans to nationalize RHTC. The attached briefing slides provide the detailed results of our review (see app. I).

To address our reporting objectives, we identified the priority security cooperation programs of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict. We also obtained and analyzed relevant U.S. funding data and, to assess the reliability of the data, we performed cross-checks of the data by comparing internal and external

⁴A U.S.-Mexico counternarcotics and anticrime initiative, the Mérida Initiative, resulted in DOD agreeing to train Mexican helicopter pilots to support counternarcotics efforts. Since the number of Mexican pilots to be trained exceeded the number that could be accommodated at Fort Rucker, the U.S. Army center that is the DOD standard for basic helicopter training, Colombia agreed that Mexican pilots could also train in Melgar, Colombia, transforming the existing helicopter school into RHTC.

⁵See Senate Report 112-173 accompanying its version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 (Pub. L. No. 112-239). We consulted with DOD's Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict on priority security cooperation programs. (See app. II for a discussion of the priority areas.) After those consultations and using our own selection methodology, we identified RHTC as the focus of this review. This review is the second in a series of reviews in response to the direction from the Senate Committee on Armed Services. We completed the first review in May 2013 as a classified briefing on another security cooperation program.

budget reports, such as congressional budget justification documents. We also interviewed officials from DOD, the Department of State (State), and the Colombian Ministry of Defense in Colombia; DOD officials at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia; and DOD and State officials in Washington, D.C. We also reviewed, among other items, U.S. and Colombian documents prepared for semiannual program management reviews of RHTC; plans of instruction for the Army Aviation Center of Excellence and RHTC; DOD's security cooperation plan for Colombia; and U.S. technical assistance agreements with Colombia and Mexico. A more detailed description of our scope and methodology is included in the briefing slides in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2012 through July 2013 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Results

- *RHTC funding:* In fiscal year 2009 through May 2013, DOD allocated approximately \$73.9 million for RHTC from DOD's Counternarcotics Central Transfer Account. As of May 2013, about \$47.0 million of the DOD funding had been disbursed.⁶ Most of the DOD funding was allocated to maintaining RHTC helicopters: about \$31.1 million (42 percent) to a maintenance contract and approximately \$12.0 million (16 percent) for parts and tools. The remainder was allocated for helicopter refurbishment, such as converting excess U.S. Army helicopters to serve as training helicopters; infrastructure improvements at the training center; and other types of support, such as fuel and ground instructors. As of June 2013, State had also allocated approximately \$382,000 in funding from its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account to training helicopter mechanics for RHTC in

⁶Of the approximately \$73.9 million allocated from the DOD Counternarcotics Central Transfer Account, about \$18.3 million remained as unliquidated obligations and about \$8.6 million remained as unobligated balances as of May 2013. The majority of the unobligated balances were allocated in fiscal year 2013.

Fort Eustis, Virginia. Mechanics for RHTC can receive training at either RHTC or Fort Eustis.

- *Achievement of training goals and targets:* DOD has largely achieved its goal and targets for the helicopter training center, but does not track any information on RHTC's longer-term results. First, DOD has, for the most part, met its goal of providing training at RHTC in accordance with DOD standards, since the training at RHTC generally follows the same key standards as the Spanish language basic helicopter training provided by the U.S. Army at Fort Rucker. Second, DOD has met one of its two targets related to the number of students enrolled at the center. Since 2009, RHTC has met targets for the number of Mexican students, but it has not met targets for the number of Colombian students because of insufficient capacity to accommodate more students. Third, DOD has met or exceeded its target of an 85 percent graduation rate for enrolled students at RHTC each year. However, DOD does not track any information on the longer-term results of the pilot training provided at RHTC that would allow DOD to evaluate the extent to which RHTC helps to meet Colombia's and Mexico's counternarcotics aviation needs. Although Colombia committed to retain personnel in assignments related to their training for a minimum of 2 years after graduation from RHTC and to provide information about these personnel to DOD, DOD officials have not obtained these data from Colombia for pilot graduates.⁷ DOD began to track the personnel assignments of mechanics trained at RHTC in January 2013 because DOD prioritized obtaining these data to ensure sufficient mechanics for future work at RHTC. The Mexican government has not committed to providing such data to the United States. However, DOD officials stated that they have requested and continue to pursue data from Mexico to show whether Mexican pilots who graduated from RHTC have used their training in subsequent assignments.
- *Nationalization of RHTC:* DOD has made some progress in its plans to nationalize RHTC, but it has extended the nationalization timeline and faces challenges in meeting the current timeline. The United States and Colombia initially planned for nationalization of Colombia's basic helicopter training school to be completed by July 2009. After

⁷Tracking such data is a best practice for training because doing so allows the training provider to know whether trainees are using what they learned as intended.

the decision to expand the school into RHTC, DOD began to plan for a projected nationalization date of 2016. Subsequently, DOD extended it to 2018 because DOD recognized that Colombia would not be ready to take over financial responsibility for RHTC by the previously planned date. DOD's current plans for full nationalization in 2018 include separate timelines for certain components, including (1) ground instruction and helicopter simulators; (2) helicopters, parts, and tools; and (3) helicopter maintenance and mechanics training. DOD is on target to first nationalize RHTC ground instruction at the end of fiscal year 2013. However, nationalization of some other RHTC components, such as simulator maintenance and parts and tools, is now scheduled to occur later than planned. Under current plans, State will provide funds from its FMF account to cover the costs of these delays. After RHTC is fully nationalized, DOD plans to continue providing tuition for third-country students. Some uncertainties may affect DOD's ability to adhere to the current nationalization plan: (1) Colombia's financial commitment to RHTC nationalization is unclear; and (2) future U.S. funding for the program is uncertain.

Conclusions

The United States has allocated over \$73 million to support a regional helicopter training center in Colombia. DOD has provided basic helicopter training for Colombians and Mexicans at RHTC at a level broadly comparable with DOD standards and has tracked some short-term performance measures, such as numbers of students trained. However, DOD does not collect information that it needs to assess the pilot training's longer-term outcomes despite the Colombian government's proven ability to track graduates of mechanics training. The data currently collected for student pilot graduation rates do not indicate whether Colombian pilot graduates successfully participated in Colombia's counternarcotics aviation efforts. DOD has requested, but has not received, information from the Colombian government on the continuing careers of RHTC's Colombian pilot graduates. Without evidence of RHTC pilot graduates' ability to use their training to help meet their countries' counternarcotics aviation needs, DOD has limited ability to demonstrate RHTC's longer-term outcomes.

Recommendation for Executive Action

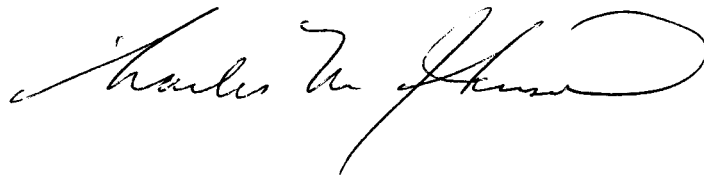
To better enable DOD to assess the longer-term outcomes of its investment in RHTC, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense work with the government of Colombia to obtain information about whether RHTC's Colombian graduates use their skills obtained at RHTC in subsequent military assignments for a minimum of 2 years after they complete RHTC training.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided DOD and State copies of this report for their review and comment. In response, DOD provided formal comments, which are reprinted in appendix III, and technical comments that we incorporated, as appropriate. DOD concurred with our recommendation. DOD agreed that tracking student assignments after training is a best practice and will discuss tracking RHTC graduates with Colombian senior defense partners. State provided no comments.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State. We will also provide copies to others on request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Charles Michael Johnson, Jr.
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Briefing for Congressional Committees



An Assessment of DOD's Assistance to the Regional Helicopter Training Center in Colombia

Briefing for Congressional Committees

For more information, contact Charles Michael Johnson, Jr. at 202-512-7331

Page 1



Contents

- Introduction
- Objectives
- Background
- Objective 1: U.S. Funding for the Regional Helicopter Training Center (RHTC)
- Objective 2: RHTC Training is Broadly Comparable with DOD Standards
- Objective 3: U.S. and Colombian Plans for Nationalizing RHTC
- Conclusions
- Recommendation for Executive Action
- Scope and Methodology

Page 2

Introduction



GAO's Mandate

- In a report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, the Senate Committee on Armed Services mandated that we review selected security cooperation programs to examine the programs' effectiveness, efficiency, and medium- and long-term results.
- After obtaining a list of priority programs from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC), we selected the Department of Defense's (DOD) RHTC in Colombia for our assessment.

Page 3



Objectives

In this briefing, we assess

- 1) U.S. government allocations, obligations, and disbursements for the RHTC in fiscal year 2009 through May 2013;
- 2) the extent to which DOD has achieved its goal and targets related to transforming the Colombian basic helicopter school into a regional facility capable of providing basic helicopter training for Colombia, Mexico, and other countries in accordance with DOD standards; and
- 3) DOD's progress, if any, in implementing its plans to nationalize RHTC (i.e., fully transfer the program's financial responsibility to Colombia).

Background



RHTC Training for Colombian and Mexican Pilots

- DOD's goal for RHTC is to assist Colombia in transforming its basic helicopter training school into a regional helicopter training facility capable of meeting Colombia's pilot training requirements while training up to 24 third-country student pilots annually in accordance with DOD standards for Spanish-language basic helicopter training.
- A U.S.-Mexico counternarcotics and anticrime initiative resulted in DOD agreeing to train Mexican helicopter pilots.¹ Since the number to be trained exceeded the number that could be accommodated at Fort Rucker, Alabama, the U.S. army center that is the DOD standard for basic helicopter training, Colombia agreed that Mexican pilots could also train at RHTC located in Melgar, Colombia.
- U.S. Southern Command is the project manager for RHTC.



Source: GAO; Map Resources (map); Nova Development (clip art).

¹To address growing narcotics and crime issues in the region, the United States and Mexico in October 2007 launched the Mérida Initiative, a \$1.6 billion effort aimed at supporting law enforcement activities.

Background



RHTC Regionalization and Nationalization through 2009



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

Background



Relevant U.S. Assistance Agreements with Colombia and Mexico

Agreements with Colombia	Selected commitments made in agreements
General Agreement for Economic, Technical and Related Assistance, July 1962	<p>The United States committed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide technical assistance to Colombia. <p>Colombia committed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allow U.S. representatives to observe and review programs and operations and • furnish any information the United States needed to evaluate results.
Annex to the General Agreement for Economic, Technical and Related Assistance, August 2004	<p>Colombia committed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimize the rotation of personnel who have received training under the annex by retaining trained personnel in assignments related to the project for a minimum of 2 years after graduation, if possible; • develop, maintain, and update a database of trained personnel; and • provide such information to the United States necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of project operations.
Agreement with Mexico	Selected commitments made in agreement
U.S.-Mexico Technical Cooperation Agreement, June 1951	<p>The United States committed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide technical assistance to Mexico. <p>Mexico committed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communicate to the United States information regarding the use of funds for any projects carried out under the agreement.

Page 7



Objective 1: U.S. Funding for RHTC

- Fiscal Years (FY) 2009 – 2013 funding allocations and disbursements (as of May 2013)
- Breakdown of DOD allocations by category

Objective 1: Funding for RHTC



U.S. Funding for RHTC in Fiscal Years 2009-2013

Total DOD counternarcotics funding for RHTC ^a (as of May 2013)	FY 2009	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	Total
Allocations	\$10,717,310	\$16,171,000	\$16,964,000	\$13,765,000	\$16,272,000	\$73,889,310
Unobligated balance	0	0	\$47,755	0	\$8,572,163	\$8,619,918
Unliquidated obligations	0	\$1,529,063	\$1,509,162	\$9,858,680	\$5,366,226	\$18,263,131
Disbursements	\$10,717,310	\$14,641,937	\$15,406,628	\$3,906,320	\$2,333,611	\$47,005,806

Source: DOD.

Note:

^aAll DOD counternarcotics funding to RHTC is from the Counternarcotics Central Transfer Account, and includes funding from the U.S. Southern Command's counternarcotics project codes 9415, 9201, and 9203.

- According to DOD data, in FY2012 through June FY2013, the Department of State (State) allocated approximately \$382,000 in funding from its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account to training helicopter mechanics for RHTC in Fort Eustis, Virginia. Mechanics for RHTC can receive training either at RHTC or Fort Eustis. DOD administers the FMF program with State funding.

Objective 1: Funding for RHTC



More Than Half of DOD's Funds Allocated toward Maintaining RHTC Helicopters

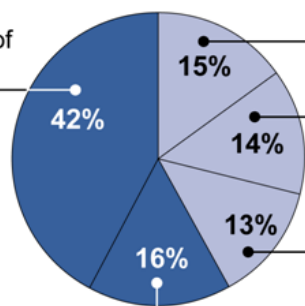
Percentage of allocated funds
FY2009 – May 2013^a

Maintenance contract (\$31,123,949):

Provides comprehensive helicopter and simulator maintenance, training of Colombian mechanics, maintenance quality control, and supervision.

Parts and tools (\$12,002,930):

Provides helicopter parts, tools, and other equipment needed to sustain current and future helicopter maintenance.



Helicopter refurbishment (\$11,319,850):

Funds U.S. Army's work to refit military helicopters to operate as training vehicles for another 10-15 years.

Infrastructure (\$10,098,551): Includes expanding a dining facility and building new classrooms, student barracks, maintenance hangars, and an auxiliary airfield.^b

Other (\$9,344,030): Includes international student support, ground school instructors, U.S. Army operational support, fuel, and communications.

■ Related to helicopter maintenance

■ Other

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

^aWe requested that DOD provide this funding data for disbursements; however, DOD was only able to provide this information for allocations within the time frame of our review.

^bAccording to documents obtained from Colombian officials, Colombia has also contributed funding toward many of the infrastructure improvements such as the dining hall expansion, new classrooms, additional barracks for students, and the auxiliary airfield.



Objective 2: Results of RHTC

- RHTC training compared with DOD standards
- Number of students enrolled compared with target numbers
- Annual graduation rates compared with target rates
- DOD's ability to evaluate longer-term RHTC results

Page 11

Objective 2: Results of RHTC



RHTC Training Generally Follows Selected Key DOD Standards for Spanish-Language Basic Helicopter Training

Selected key DOD standards for Spanish-language basic helicopter training ^a	RHTC training performance
10-16 to 1 student to ground instructor ratio	12 to 1 student to ground instructor ratio
2 to 1 student to instructor pilot ratio	2 to 1 student to instructor pilot ratio
27 flight hours in simulator during training	30 flight hours in simulator during training
128 flight hours in helicopter during training, with topics including basic flying, flying with instruments, tactics, flying at night, and flying with night-vision goggles	<p>99 flight hours in helicopter during training, with topics including basic flying, flying with instruments, tactics, flying at night, and flying with night-vision goggles</p> <p>The RHTC curriculum includes fewer flight hours because</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some riskier maneuvers are not practiced due to RHTC having fewer training helicopters and less repair capability than Fort Rucker, and • RHTC has a smaller flight area so less time is spent flying to training sites.
Standardization pilots evaluate qualified instructor pilots to become standardization pilots. ^b	At least one standardization pilot has been properly certified, with evaluations performed by another standardization pilot.
Instructional materials used are approved by the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command.	RHTC uses instructional materials provided by the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

Notes:

^aThe DOD standards included here are plans and expectations set for how to deliver the basic helicopter training provided in the Spanish language at Fort Rucker.

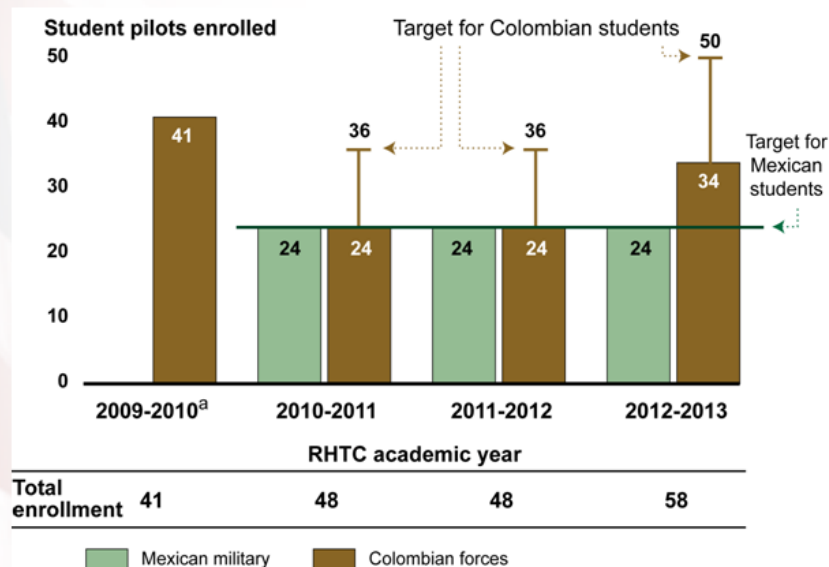
^bA standardization pilot supervises instructor pilots and helps to ensure that training meets DOD standards.

Page 12

Objective 2: Results of RHTC



Target Met for Mexican Student Enrollment but Not for Colombian Student Enrollment



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

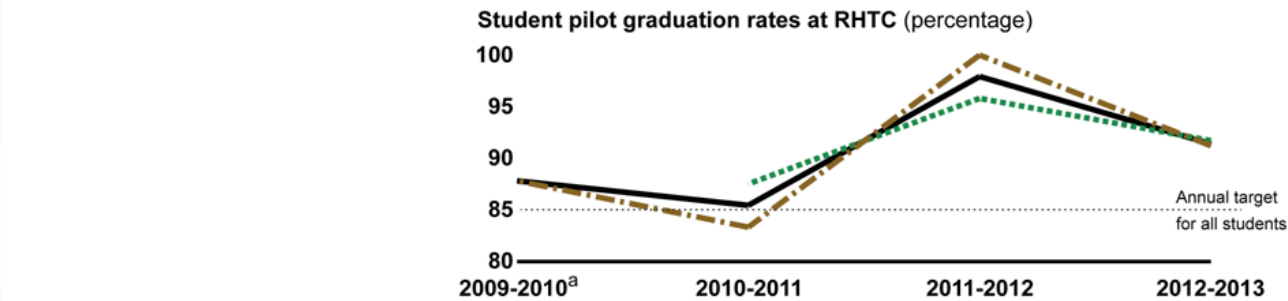
^aGraph does not show two Peruvian student pilots who enrolled and graduated from RHTC in 2009-2010.

- RHTC has increased its annual enrollment in recent years but has not met both annual targets for number of students enrolled.
- RHTC has met the target of training 24 Mexican pilots per year.
- RHTC has not met targets for Colombian students because of the insufficient capacity to accommodate more students.
- According to DOD officials, RHTC should meet its combined targets of 74 total students per year once an auxiliary airfield is operational.

Objective 2: Results of RHTC



RHTC Has Generally Exceeded Its Target for Graduation Rates



Source of graduates/students enrolled	RHTC academic year			
Colombian military	36/41	20/24	24/24	31/34
Mexican military	0/0	21/24	23/24	22/24
Total	36/41	41/48	47/48	53/58

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

^aGraph does not show two Peruvian student pilots who enrolled and graduated from RHTC in 2009-2010.

- Students who failed to complete the training did so for reasons such as illness, legal issues, academic problems, flight deficiencies, honor code violations, or air accidents.

Objective 2: Results of RHTC



DOD Lacks Data Needed to Ensure that RHTC Graduates Have Used Training on the Job

- Although Colombia made commitments to retain personnel in assignments related to their training for a minimum of 2 years after graduation, maintain a database of these personnel, and provide information about their assignments to the United States, DOD officials have not successfully collected these data for RHTC pilot graduates. This hinders DOD's ability to evaluate the longer-term results of RHTC.
- DOD officials stated that they have requested these data for graduates of pilot and mechanics training at RHTC. However, DOD has not received any data on the assignments of pilot graduates. DOD prioritized tracking data on the assignments of mechanic graduates to ensure there would be enough to support RHTC and began receiving data on them from Colombia in January 2013.
- Tracking such data is a best practice for training because doing so allows the training provider to know whether trainees are using what they learned as intended.
- The Mexican government has not committed to providing similar data on RHTC graduates. However, DOD officials stated that they have requested, and continue to pursue obtaining, such data on Mexican graduates.

Page 15



Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC

- DOD plans for nationalization of RHTC
- Timelines for each component in DOD's plans for nationalization of RHTC
- Uncertainty relating to nationalization of RHTC

Page 16

Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC



DOD Has Extended RHTC Nationalization Plans

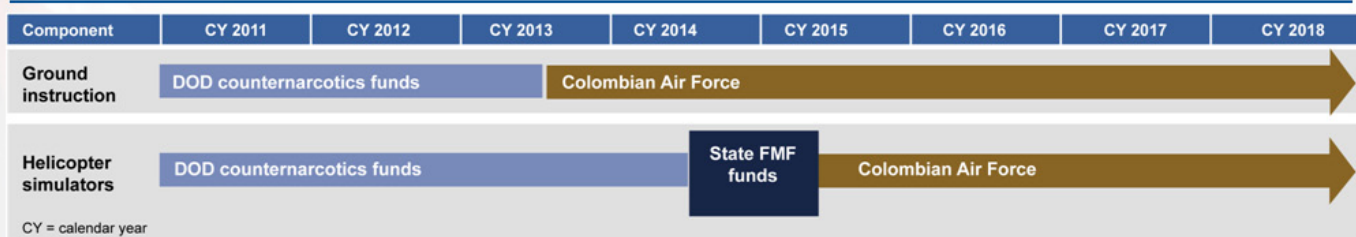
- The United States and Colombia initially planned to fully nationalize Colombia's basic helicopter training school by July 2009.
- After the decision to expand the school to RHTC, DOD began to plan for a projected nationalization date of 2016. Subsequently, DOD extended it to 2018 because, according to DOD officials, DOD recognized that Colombia would not be ready to take over financial responsibility for RHTC as originally planned. As a result, DOD plans to spend about \$38 million between FY2016 and FY2018 on RHTC.
- DOD developed an RHTC nationalization plan to track progress. The plan includes the following components, each with a separate timeline for nationalization:
 - 1) Ground instruction and helicopter simulators
 - 2) Helicopters, parts, and tools
 - 3) Helicopter maintenance and mechanics training
- DOD is working with the Colombian Ministry of Defense to nationalize each component according to the agreed plan and intends to continue funding the tuition of international students sent to RHTC after its nationalization.²

²The international students referred to here and throughout the briefing are international students from third countries other than Colombia.

Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC



DOD Is on Target to Nationalize RHTC Ground Instruction but Not Helicopter Simulators



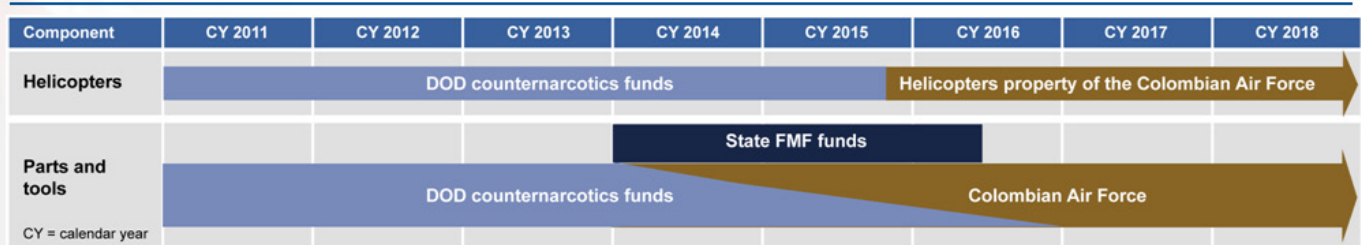
Source: GAO analysis of DOD data on planned obligations.

- **Ground instruction:** DOD's contract for ground instructors expires at the end of September 2013. Colombian Air Force officials told us that Colombian ground instructors will be ready to take over the function at this time.
- **Helicopter simulators:** According to project documents, Colombia was scheduled to take over simulator maintenance in 2014. However, because Colombia had not budgeted for this function, DOD agreed to continue supporting it using State FMF funds until August 2015. As of May 2013, it was not clear whether Colombia had agreed to take over simulator maintenance by August 2015.

Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC



DOD and State Plan to Fund RHTC Parts and Tools for Longer Than Expected



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data on planned obligations.

- **Helicopters:** By September 2015, DOD will refurbish 30 U.S. Army excess helicopters, specifically OH-58s, and convert them into training helicopters for RHTC. In 2016, DOD plans to transfer the helicopters' titles to the Colombians. As of May 2013, DOD had provided 18 of the 30 helicopters to Colombia.³
- **Parts and tools:** DOD's goal is to reduce counternarcotics funding while using FMF funds from State to purchase parts and tools starting in 2014. That same year, DOD will begin transitioning responsibility for this function to the Colombian Air Force. Colombia will use the Foreign Military Sales program to purchase some of the parts and tools through 2016. The goal is for the Colombian Air Force to be equipped with enough parts and tools to allow it to assume sole responsibility for maintenance by 2016.

³DOD had also provided an additional 2 helicopters to Colombia that were damaged during training exercises.



Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC

Maintenance and Training Mechanics Are Keys to RHTC Long-Term Success

Component	CY 2011	CY 2012	CY 2013	CY 2014	CY 2015	CY 2016	CY 2017	CY 2018
Helicopter maintenance	DOD counternarcotics funds					Colombian Air Force		
Mechanics training	DOD counternarcotics funds							
	State FMF funds							

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data on planned obligations.

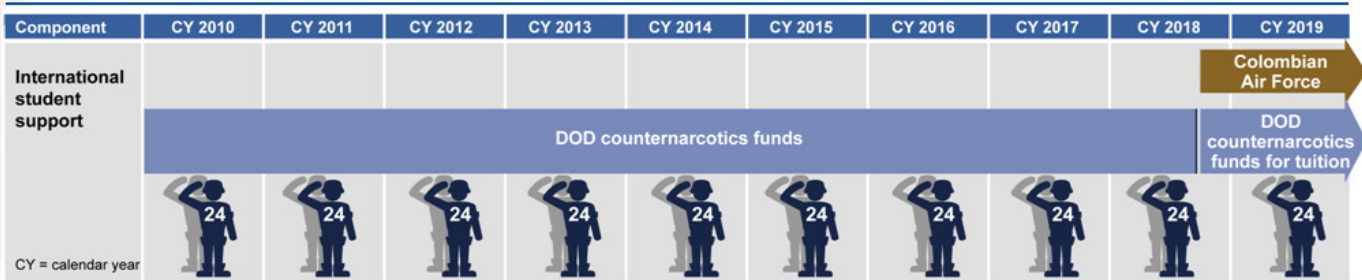
- Helicopter maintenance:** Since July 2010, a DOD contractor has maintained RHTC helicopter training fleet and simulators. The contract has been extended several times to accommodate new requirements related to the school's expansion. DOD will transfer helicopter maintenance to Colombia by 2016 but maintain the contract at a reduced funding level to provide maintenance mentorship support through 2018.
- Mechanics training:** The contractor began providing basic mechanics training to Colombian personnel in February 2012. The goal is to train 86 mechanics at Fort Eustis, Virginia, and RHTC by 2014. According to DOD officials, reaching this goal would ensure that RHTC has enough trained mechanics when the Colombian Air Force begins to take over maintenance responsibilities in 2016. As of March 2013, 55 students have enrolled and 45 have graduated.

Page 20

Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC



DOD Plans to Support Training for International Students Until and After RHTC is Nationalized



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data on planned obligations.

- DOD support for international students currently includes the following:
 - Flight and equipment
 - Food and lodging
 - School materials
 - Aviation fuel
- Through 2018, DOD expects all international students at RHTC to be Mexican military personnel.
- After nationalization in 2018, DOD plans to continue to support training of international students by paying their tuition, if Colombia agrees.

Objective 3: Nationalization of RHTC



Out-Year Funds for Nationalizing RHTC Are Uncertain

- **Colombia's long-term financial commitment to RHTC nationalization is unclear:** While Colombian officials indicated they are preparing for nationalization, Colombia has not budgeted for future contributions to RHTC's nationalization. According to Colombian government officials, they expect to request funds for nationalization in their 2015-2018 budget but do not know whether the proposal will be approved. In addition, Colombia did not send high-level officials to participate in November 2012 and May 2013 meetings set to discuss nationalization.
- **Future U.S. funding is uncertain:** DOD estimates it will cost more than \$12 million per year in U.S. counternarcotics funds for RHTC until it is nationalized. However, according to DOD documents, possible cuts to DOD funding could affect the nationalization time frames.

Page 22



Conclusions

- The United States has supported basic helicopter training for Colombian and Mexican military personnel at RHTC, but DOD does not evaluate any metrics related to the pilot training's longer-term outcomes.
- DOD has requested but has not received any information from the Colombian government on the continuing careers of RHTC's Colombian pilot graduates despite commitments from the Colombian government to provide such information and the Colombian government's proven ability to track graduates of mechanics training.
- Because they have not collected such data, DOD officials do not know whether pilots who graduated from RHTC are using their training in counternarcotics aviation units, as intended.
- The longer-term outcomes of RHTC could be better demonstrated by measuring the ability of RHTC graduates to use their training to help meet their countries' counternarcotics aviation needs.
- The timeline for nationalization of RHTC has been extended, and uncertainty remains that could cause it to slip further beyond 2018.



Recommendation for Executive Action

- To better enable DOD to assess the longer-term outcomes of its investment in RHTC, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense work with the government of Colombia to obtain information about whether RHTC's Colombian graduates use their skills obtained at RHTC in subsequent military assignments for a minimum of 2 years after they complete RHTC training.



Scope and Methodology

- The Senate Armed Services Committee report (Senate Report No. 112-173) associated with the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 (Pub. L. No. 112-239) mandated that GAO review the DOD security cooperation programs' effectiveness, efficiency, and results over time, providing routine briefings to Congress. GAO consulted with DOD's SO/LIC regarding priority security cooperation programs. After consulting with SO/LIC and applying our own selection methodology, we chose the DOD-funded RHTC in Colombia for our current review.
- To select RHTC for this review, we obtained a list of security cooperation priority projects for each area of responsibility under SO/LIC. Using our own criteria, we identified SO/LIC priority projects that (1) had concrete, measurable objectives; (2) had been operating for at least 2 years with some completed activities or deliverables; (3) had clear and reliable funding levels; (4) were not extremely large or small in terms of funding or scope; (5) included elements familiar to GAO; and (6) were safely accessible for observation by GAO personnel in the field. To avoid duplication, we eliminated any projects from the list that were already being, or had recently been, assessed by GAO or other government agencies or their contractors.



Scope and Methodology (cont'd)

- For objective 1, assessing U.S. government allocations, obligations, and disbursements for RHTC in fiscal year 2009 through May 2013, we obtained and analyzed data on DOD's overall funding for RHTC, including DOD counternarcotics funding and State funding from the FMF account. To evaluate the reliability of the DOD counternarcotics funding data, we performed cross-checks, for example, reviewing and comparing data from congressional budget justification documents for fiscal years 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. After performing cross-checks of the funding information, we informed DOD of some discrepancies with regard to fiscal year 2011 data. In response, DOD provided updated information that we incorporated into our report. We also interviewed DOD officials responsible for managing the FMF and counternarcotics funding data, and determined that the funding data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of the report.
- For objective 2, assessing the extent to which DOD has achieved its targets related to transforming Colombia's basic helicopter facility into a regional center capable of providing basic helicopter training for Colombia, Mexico, and other countries, we interviewed and obtained documentation from DOD officials at the Pentagon, the U.S. Southern Command, the U.S. Northern Command, and RHTC. We obtained and analyzed enrollment and graduation data provided by officials from the U.S. Southern Command and the Technical Assistance Field Team in Melgar, Colombia, to compare targets and results. We assessed the reliability of these performance data through interviews with DOD officials and by performing some logic checks of the data provided. We determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. We reviewed U.S. and Colombian documents prepared for semiannual program management reviews of RHTC; DOD's security cooperation plan for Colombia; and U.S.-Colombian and U.S.-Mexican technical assistance agreements.



Scope and Methodology (cont'd)

- Also for objective 2, assessing the extent to which DOD has achieved its goal of providing basic helicopter training to DOD standards, we traveled to Fort Rucker, Alabama, where we interviewed officials from the B Company, 212th Aviation Regiment, regarding their Spanish-language basic helicopter training program, and observed the training facilities and equipment. We also reviewed documents we obtained at Fort Rucker's Army Aviation Center of Excellence, including instructional materials and plans of instruction. Based on our visit to Fort Rucker, we identified standards in several key areas of basic helicopter flight training that we could examine at RHTC. These standards are plans and expectations set for how to deliver the basic helicopter training provided in the Spanish language at Fort Rucker. We then confirmed the importance of these key areas with officials at Fort Rucker and the Army's Training Doctrine Command. At RHTC, we observed training facilities and equipment; interviewed U.S. and Colombian officials, including members of the Technical Assistance Field Team, contracted ground instructors, pilot instructors, and master mechanics; and reviewed documents and instructional materials. We focused on the selected key areas that we had identified for basic helicopter flight training and noted the degree to which RHTC's training followed DOD standards. While we did not make determinations on each selected standard, we determined that, overall, RHTC's training generally followed the selected standards. However, it was beyond the scope of our review to compare the quality of training provided at RHTC with that provided at Fort Rucker.



Scope and Methodology (cont'd)

- Also for objective 2, we traveled to Joint Base Langley-Eustis, where we interviewed officials from the Army's Training Doctrine Command and Security Assistance Training Field Activity to learn about maintenance training and the types of costs typically associated with helicopter training. In Bogota, Colombia, we interviewed State and DOD at the U.S. Embassy.
- For objective 3, assessing DOD's progress, if any, in implementing plans to nationalize the RHTC—that is, to fully transfer the program's financial responsibility to Colombia—we reviewed DOD's nationalization plans for the RHTC and interviewed DOD officials in Washington, D.C.; DOD officials at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota who were responsible for managing the RHTC's nationalization efforts; and the project manager for RHTC from U.S. Southern Command. We also discussed nationalization plans with Colombian government officials from the Ministry of Defense and with Colombian Air Force officials.
- We conducted this performance audit from August 2012 to July 2013 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Priorities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict

This appendix provides information on the priorities of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) for their security cooperation activities, as of March 2013, according to Department of Defense (DOD) officials.

SO/LIC is responsible for the management of a portion of DOD's security cooperation programs throughout the world.¹ In the management of these programs, SO/LIC has identified its priorities in building partner capacity and security cooperation by region, and then identified the most pertinent activities conducted within those regions. These priorities include:

1. **Afghanistan and Pakistan:** Capacity-building efforts for U.S. partners conducting counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda in the region. Priority activities in this region include:
 - Section 1206 programs² for partner nations contributing troops to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan;
 - Ministry of Defense Advisor Program for Afghanistan;
 - Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI) for Afghanistan; and
 - Section 1004³ and Section 1033⁴ counternarcotics projects in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region.

¹SO/LIC is divided into three areas of responsibility: (1) Counternarcotics and Global Threats; (2) Partnership Strategy and Stability Operations; and (3) Special Operations and Combating Terrorism.

²Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, Pub. L. 106-193, established this program, also known as the Global Train and Equip Program, which is used to build the capacity of foreign military forces through the provision of training, equipment, and small-scale military construction activities.

³Section 1004 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991, Pub. L. 101-510, as amended, is used, among other things, to support counternarcotics activities of foreign law enforcement agencies.

⁴Section 1033 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998, Pub. L. 105-85, as amended, is used to equip specific foreign partners to support their counternarcotics activities.

2. **Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula:** Capacity-building efforts for U.S. partners conducting counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda in the region. Priority activities in this region include:
 - 1206 and 1207(n)⁵ programs in Yemen.
3. **Somalia and the Horn of Africa:** Capacity-building efforts for our partners conducting counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda affiliates. Priority activities in this region include:
 - 1206 Programs and 1207(n) programs in Uganda, Burundi, and Kenya.
4. **North and West Africa:** Capacity-building efforts for our partners conducting counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda affiliates. Priority activities in this region include:
 - 1206 programs in Mauritania and Burkina Faso;
 - Section 1004 and Section 1022⁶ projects in Cape Verde, Chad, Gambia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Trans-Sahel region; and
 - Section 1033 projects in Nigeria.
5. **Western Hemisphere:** Capacity-building efforts for our partners countering drug trafficking organizations and other networks. Priority activities in this region include:
 - DIRI for Colombia; and
 - Section 1004 and Section 1033 projects in Mexico, Colombia, and Central America.
6. **Asia:** Capacity-building efforts for our partners countering violent extremist organizations and other networks. Priority activities in this region include:
 - 1206 programs in the Philippines and Bangladesh; and
 - Section 1004 projects in Indonesia and Vietnam.

⁵Section 1207(n) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, Pub. L. 112-81, authorized the Secretary of Defense, with the concurrence of the Secretary of State, to provide equipment, supplies, training, and minor construction to enhance the counterterrorism operations capacity of the national military forces, security agencies serving a similar defense function, and border security forces in East Africa and Yemen. Section 1203 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, Pub. L. 112-239, authorized similar assistance for Fiscal Year 2013.

⁶Section 1022 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004, Pub. L. 108-136, as amended, is used to provide support to law enforcement agencies conducting counternarcotics and counterterrorism activities.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

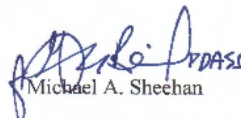
JUL 18 2013

Mr. Charles M. Johnson, Jr.
Director, International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Enclosed is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-13-674, "Building Partner Capacity: DoD is Meeting Most Targets for Colombia's Regional Helicopter Training Center but Should Track Graduates," dated June 27, 2013 (GAO Code 320932).

Sincerely,


Michael A. Sheehan

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JUNE 27, 2013
GAO-13-674 (GAO CODE 320932)

**“BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY: DOD IS MEETING MOST
TARGETS FOR COLOMBIA'S REGIONAL HELICOPTER TRAINING
CENTER BUT SHOULD TRACK GRADUATES”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION**

RECOMMENDATION: The GAO recommends that the Department of Defense (DoD) work with the government of Colombia to take steps to obtain information on Colombian graduates' use of their skills obtained at the Regional Helicopter training Center (RHTC) in subsequent military assignments for a period of at least two years after graduation.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. DoD agrees that tracking student assignments after training is a best practice, and although anecdotal evidence suggests that graduates of the RHTC are being employed in the capacity for which they were trained (for example, while Colombia has the largest fleet of U.S.-built helicopters in Latin America, we are not aware of either pilot shortages or reductions in helicopter usage), DoD will discuss with our Colombian senior defense partners.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Charles Michael Johnson, Jr., (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Judy McCloskey (Assistant Director), Eugene Beye, Martin De Alteriis, Michael Kniss, Heather Latta, Celia Mendive, and Pierre Toureille made key contributions to this report. Mark Dowling, Etana Finkler, Reid Lowe, and Christopher J. Mulkins provided technical assistance.

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